

**HB 5959 and HB 5804
December 3, 2014**

Statement of Harriet Cook, former Mayor Pro Tem of Greenville, and William Cook, Cook Investments/Southwestern, to Hon. Frank Foster, Chair, Commerce Committee

We provide this statement in support of amending the Elliott Larsen Civil Rights Act (ELCRA) to include "sexual orientation and gender identity."

The Cook family has lived in Greenville, Michigan, for three generations and made significant business and philanthropic investments in the community. We own Cook investments/Southwestern, a partnership of co-owners with brothers William F. and Byron J. Cook, whose primary business is the exploration of oil and gas in the Michigan geological basin. We are also involved in residential and commercial development in Greenville.

And we are the proud parents of two gay sons -- both of whom have left the state. We can't say that they left because it is legal to fire someone in Michigan because they are gay, but we can say that this hole in the law sends a strong message that this is not a place that tolerates, encourages, and thrives on diversity and inclusion. In our own circles, we know of two women who have had to hide their sexual orientation for fear of losing their jobs. We know from time volunteering for GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, that we have a lot of education to do in the public schools to decrease the sense of isolation and stigma for gay and transgender children.

It is long past time that we ensured that this community receives legal protection when they are victims of job or housing discrimination. It is long past time that we stopped using religious faith as an excuse to justify discrimination. It is long past time that we allowed an open and robust debate in the halls of our state legislature. It is long past time that we caught up with states across the country who have modernized their human rights laws. It is long past time that we should have to try to offer our children a decent explanation of why they cannot have legal protection in Michigan.

As parents, it is inconceivable that our sons would not be able to be who they are, and be employed the way they would want, and live in housing of their choosing without worrying about their security. We urge you to adopt an amendment to include sexual orientation and gender identity in our human rights law and to do so now.